

# Integrating Psychology and Philosophy: A Brief Analysis of *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*

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## Abstract

A brief analysis of *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* gives a glimpse of beliefs and practices cherished by the family that attempts to employ Jewish teachings to raise children. The child nurturing and rearing practices are in a degree enlightening and supplementing the existing literature in education. Prevention with the inspiration from time-tested lessons of philosophy drawn from Judaism and psychology theory could bring about a marked positive impact on child rearing. Three cornerstone principles of Jewish living—moderation, celebration and sanctification are frames of reference in developing philosophy of cultivating children. Moderation helps achieve the balance between what parents ought to do and what they should let go and tells priorities and values that make peace of mind accessible in the materialistic, anxious and highly competitive world. Gratitude is the most valuable character trait children need, for being grateful and celebrating what they are granted by life, they will always see the most beautiful world and stay with the most peaceful mind, both of which are essential to the pleasure of life. Sanctification indicates that all daily enterprises are holy and therefore demand devotion and commitment.

**Keywords:** celebration, moderation, philosophy of Judaism, sanctification

## 1. Introduction

*The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* is presented by Wendy Mogel, who used to practice child psychology and then engaged herself in exploring the possibility of integrating psychology and philosophy of Judaism to better tackle problems concerning child rearing. The philosophy that guides her to shift from providing child clients with psychological support to assisting their parents in fostering a set of ideas approaching problems through their children's development results from her updated faith—prevention could probably work better than diagnosis and treatment; lecturing, teaching parenting classes and consulting with parents and schools would possibly help more children and their families than private therapy sessions.

Indeed, prevention is better than talking cure, in particular to children in their overall development; meanwhile, as detected from the book, prevention with the inspiration from time-tested lessons of philosophy drawn from Judaism could bring about a marked positive impact on the whole family, which may not be attained easily otherwise.

The philosophy of prevention reveals itself through reflections on Jewish teachings, which give the readers an insight into the world, the life and the family from the perspective of culture and guide people from the depth of their soul. Prevention is not a guiding concept for “what-to-do” in emergency, but a lasting influence that becomes increasingly evident throughout the life.

The implementation of prevention demands positive involvement of parents, the first teachers of children, whose role can never be neglected in cultivating children's character and morality—essential element that determines those children's sense of well-being and value of life. Meanwhile, issues concerning character and morality, however, could also become the sources of child problems if not well handled. Therefore, it is quite necessary for parents to shoulder the responsibilities to guide children in their early years when their mind is still quite plastic.

After all, children are still too young to be left in a status of guiding themselves in today's complex world, which may even make some adults get confused. Just as the concept of “Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)” proposed by Vygotsky (1978) suggests, a child is able to reach the potential skill of an upper limit with the

assistance of a more capable instructor, active involvement of parents—authority figures—will help their children figure out the most appropriate and acceptable way to perceive the world and adjust themselves to the life. The role of the parents in that regard is irreplaceable. No one could ever work better than parents themselves, not the baby-sitter, not the highly paid senior baby-sitter—clinical psychologist, not children themselves yet.

## 2. Moderation, Celebration and Sanctification

As suggested by Dr. Mogel, to raise self-reliant children, parents are supposed to learn to cherish moderation, celebration and sanctification—three cornerstone principles of Jewish living—frames of reference in developing philosophy of child rearing.

### 2.1 Moderation

While the philosophy of prevention stresses the significance of parent involvement and guidance in the development of children, it does not mean the will of parents could be imposed on children, let alone pushing children to excel and dignifying the practice by the idea of competitive world readiness.

True, just as Sherwood Anderson wrote in *Discovery of a Father*, “You hear it said that fathers want their sons to be what they feel they themselves cannot be” (Wu, 2010, p. 7), some parents today see children as extensions of themselves and then tend to chase lost dreams through their children’s fulfillment, neglecting the fact that children are individuals with their own hopes and dreams. Undoubtedly, the involvement of parents should not move too far in the other direction—demanding too much from children.

Therefore, “moderation” is the first concept parents should bear in mind. Indeed, it is not a new principle. About 2,500 years ago, moderation was the belief strongly held by Athenians, the first truly literate population on earth. Literally, the word refers to the action of making something less extreme, intense, or violent.

#### 2.1.1 Balance

When it comes to parenting, moderation, first and foremost, helps parents achieve the balance between what they ought to do and what they should let go. Needless to say, this balance is closely associated with the principle for child rearing.

#### Uniqueness of Children

What kind of people do we expect our children to become? What can we do to help them? These are crucial questions that determine our rules regarding raising children. The fact is, however, before most parents figure out the answer to the questions, they have already followed suit—expecting children to be good at everything, providing children with so-called opportunities to express themselves and shielding children from any potential emotional or physical discomfort.

The consequence is self-evident.

While most parents are eager to expect the best possible future for their children, they ignore the fact that each child is unique and will take his/her own path. The simple truth is right there in the philosophy of Judaism, which states that “we raise our children not in hope that they are the Messiah but to be themselves” (Mogel, 2008, p. 50). Dr. Mogel (2008), too, concludes that in Judaism she “found an approach that respects children’s uniqueness while accepting them in all their ordinary glory” (p. 41). Theoretically, this belief has long been supported by the scientific model proposed by Howard Gardner in his book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (Gardner, 1983), in which he claimed that intelligence differentiates into specific “modalities” and each individual possesses a unique blend of all the intelligences. Therefore, parents should relax, slow down and stop using the same standards to evaluate their children. On this issue, the agreement achieved between philosophy of Judaism and scientific research just reveals the eternal truth in life—each child is an individual and what parents and teachers need to do is “make plans and adjustments to promote each child’s individual development and learning as fully as possible” (NAEYC, 2009, p. 9).

Then, what are parents supposed to do? Driven by good intentions, the sense of responsibilities and the commitment to the growth and development of children, anxious parents have been stimulated greatly to give children a hand.

#### Insight into Guidance

Parents need an insight into the implication of guidance in this context, they need moderate assessment of children’s need for self-expression and then they need to teach their children something that could benefit them in their lifelong journey.

The reality is, however, most of the parents fall into the trap built by themselves. Because of overvaluing

democratic philosophy at home, the power of parents diminishes and the same is true with the respect they get from their children. How could they expect their children to follow their guidance and heed their advice if those children do not honor parents? Therefore, before parents start to help their children, first they need a ladder to help themselves out of the trap with the perspective from the philosophy of Judaism—"take your rightful place at the head of the family table" (Mogel, 2008, p. 63). Clinging to that principle, with the "creed", for instance, "because I'm your mother" (Mogel, 2008, p. 70), parents' guidance can be quite effective in approaching problems. True, before children become experts on what they need, they need guidance, not consensus. Moderation in the attitude toward children's voice is the guiding philosophy all the time.

Then, what is the specific guidance parents should give to their children? There are numerous answers to the question and in the book alone many inspiring suggestions worthy of digestion could be found. Nevertheless, among them, parents may wonder what should be the most important guidance that is most valuable to their children.

In a changing world, miracle happens all the time and no one could foresee what will be the most valuable skill in the future. As average persons, the best thing we could do probably is grasp some fundamental principles to which we can stick while coping with shifting events. Returning to the basics may not produce quick desired profits, but the traits that have served people for centuries do contribute to the development of healthy and good people—the satisfactory outcome of child rearing to almost all parents. Dr. Mogel (2008) suggests character traits such as honesty, tenacity, flexibility, optimism, and compassion are the only things certain to be valuable and therefore worthy of our time and effort to pass them on. Coincidentally, her proposal is just in line with the coming back reverence for traditional culture education in China, which claims that education in humanities, psychology and morality is essential to the lifelong well-being of children. Apparently, the moderation between engagement of the world and self-discipline gives us a glimpse of guidance to children. It is impossible for parents to always guide their children then and there in constantly changing life, but the idea of moderate self-discipline will guide them along the way.

Children need guidance, whereas, guidance should not become the excuse for over protection. There are cases where parents should let children go.

#### Let Children Go

Life is full of ups and downs and therefore the science of living is not convincing without the involvement of bumps and knocks. Let children develop strength through overcoming obstacles by themselves. Real protection means assisting children in developing the ability to tolerate emotional distress and solve their own problems. There is the subtlety brought about by moderate guidance.

As the theory of cognitive development advanced by Piaget (Piaget, 1954) suggests, intellectual growth develops as the result of interactions between a child and his/her environment, it is particularly true in the development of problem solving ability, say, to manage "wave pattern" in life. Doing is learning. Let children experience the harsh life and use their own judgment to survive. Strong and healthy children grow mature with the freedom to learn from experience. Overprotection, emotionally or physically, ultimately deprives them. Therefore, feel at ease while approaching a skinned knee and take it as the inevitable element in the growth of children. As an old Chinese saying goes, "A fall into the pit, a gain in your wit", those who have had experienced the pain and suffering of the skinned knee will learn much more than they ever could do from your teaching or any creed. The title of the book *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* presents the simplest and most incisive approval of falling—misfortune may be an actual blessing, an opportunity for your children to grow.

All in all, the principle of moderation provides parents with right perspective on the nature of children and inspires them to let nature take its course; moderation in guidance tells them they cannot prepare their children for everything in the future and the most valuable guidance they could give is to teach their children to be good people with time-tested character traits; in addition, the secret of successful moderate guidance lies in the right point at which we know when we have to withdraw our power and let children go.

The balance between what we ought to do and what we should let go achieved from moderation paves the way for the smooth and fruitful parenting.

#### 2.1.2 Peace of Mind

Secondly, moderation tells priorities and values that make peace of mind accessible in the materialistic, anxious and highly competitive world.

Low-quality Time

Out of nowhere, cult of high-quality time has influenced many parents who strive to be “extraordinary” and try to make every minute rewarding. They are so ambitious in guiding children while neglecting the pleasure in parenting. They are always under sort of pressure with their children since they frequently indulge themselves in seeking the best way to be excellent parents. However, it does not take a genius to foresee what could possibly happen in decades—there is nothing but plan for improvement left in the memories of both parents and children. On the way of pursuing the intentional maximum benefit, busy parents usually misunderstand the most sacred gift to us implied in the philosophy of Judaism—the power and holiness of the present moment. To both parents and children, what makes the present moment sacred is not always the achievement that results from plan and pressure, but the pleasure and enjoyment of being together.

Dr. Mogel (2008) suggests we should “tolerate some low-quality time” and “make everyone in the family relax”. The time devoted to hanging around your children will possibly become the most impressive part in the memory. In other words, moderate guidance encourages us to be expert at timing, aware of the strength of both tight and loose management of our practice.

### The Least Hurried Moments

From the view of outsiders, Friday nights is sacred to those who believe in Judaism because of prescribed blessings, rituals and a formal meal. A step closer, you will find the essence of gathering indeed deserves honor and the effort should be cherished.

Nowadays, to keep up with the high pace of modern life and survive, it seems that every one is fully occupied and they can hardly stop to spend time with those they care about. Then, less communication gradually becomes the source of many social problems, such as divorce and rebellion of children.

The ritual gathering on Friday nights serves as the intermezzo between tight schedules, reminding us of the importance of family, reflection and relaxation. Taking turns describing the best things that happened during the week and catching up on one another’s good news as Dr. Mogel’s family do does help tired people unwind, restores the connection to one another, brings them closer together and inspires them to keep moving and enjoy the coming week.

The wisdom of moderation reveals itself between hectic days and the tenderest moments of the week, which could guide participants to a healthy and hopeful lifestyle. The lasting influence could possibly bring about many more benefits than children could realize now. In the future, whatever they do, wherever they go, as long as the ritual on Friday nights accompanies them, the power of the habit will always bring peace and encouragement to their mind—consistent drive to enjoy life.

Dr. Mogel cites statement from Plato “The unexamined life is not worth living” (Mogel, 2008, p. 210) in the book. Indeed, Friday nights offer the right time to examine life. Just slow down a bit and cherish the moment with the family, the children in particular.

### 2.2 Celebration

“Celebration and gratitude are key concepts in Judaism and Jewish child-rearing” (Mogel, 2008, p. 35). As it reveals in the book, people are supposed to feel grateful to what they have, which also helps them get out of the hard times in deciding what they need and what they want—the same struggle that overwhelms children.

#### 2.2.1 Role Model

In order to teach children gratitude, parents must start with themselves as research “confirms that parents do have a significant impact on their children’s character. Mothers and fathers usually influence their children more than any other environmental factor” (Mogel, 2008, p. 190). This statement is strongly supported by Social Learning Theory, in which Albert Bandura (Bandura, 1963) claims that children continually learn desirable and undesirable behavior through observational learning and in childhood a role model is someone of authority or higher status, say, parents.

Then, before parents help children acquire the skill of feeling grateful, they need practice gratitude first. Frankly speaking, few of people could resist the temptation of the materialistic world and conduct self-discipline in controlling desire. Just as children are fascinated by toys, adults sometimes also get lost in the chase of “a little more and a little more”. Being grateful is not easy.

Dr. Mogel (2008, p. 125) offers two things to cultivate gratitude: “appreciating what we have and redirecting our desires”.

It is not uncommon for people to forget being grateful when they take something they have for granted. Therefore, we need constantly reflect on what we need for survival and what is chased out of our desire.

Learn to appreciate what we have already had and feel happy and glad that they are available to us. Cheer us up with the blessings brought about by plenty of things we are given and value the spiritual peace we acquire with gratitude.

Redirecting our desires is effective in rescuing those who are easily destroyed by struggle against “what I want”. Going to the library or immersing in books to seek fulfillment in spirits instead of shopping will bring much more pleasure than you get something you want. After all, satisfaction from spiritual elevation always lasts longer than that from materials.

In the philosophy of Jewish, deed carries more weight than creed. Parents should be the right role model with the right behavior in teaching children being grateful and celebrate what they have.

### 2.2.2 A Grateful Heart

Gratitude is highlighted in the principles of Judaism as well as in parenting not merely because of its specific value in guiding us to cope with the fight against desire, which just gives us a glimpse of its power, but because a grateful heart will enable people, in particularly children, to celebrate everything they encounter and experience with optimism and hope.

Take a glance and we could always find different reactions to the success and setbacks among people. Some become intoxicated by achievement or grumble bitterly at frustration; some stay composed and calm, welcoming outcomes, for better or for worse, with joy. In the eye of the second group, they regard whatever they are given as the experience of life and therefore deserve their gratitude.

Good news is the fulfillment of life as the reward for effort and bad news is a message demanding more endeavors and an opportunity for further improvement in character. A grateful heart makes people embrace the rise and fall with hope and dream.

Restless and adrift, young children easily get annoyed or frustrated at the ebb and flow of life. Teaching them to be grateful and celebrate what they experience is providing them with the anchor of spirits, which could help them enjoy life wherever they are and the influence is everlasting.

Dr. Robert Emmons, a professor at the University of California found scientific proof that people who practice gratitude are more loving, forgiving, and optimistic about the future (Huntington, 2012, p. 2).

If we intend to prepare our children for the world, gratitude is the most valuable character trait they need, for being grateful and celebrating what they are granted by life, they will always see the most beautiful world and stay with the most peaceful mind, both of which are essential to the pleasure of life.

### 2.3 Sanctification

Sanctification “is the process of acknowledging the holiness in everyday actions and events” (Mogel, 2008, p.35). In the philosophy of Judaism, all our daily enterprises are holy and therefore demand our devotion and commitment.

#### 2.3.1 Holiness in Chores

Before parents involve children in chores, they both need to understand chores are the basics to life and therefore letting children share the responsibilities in the task is giving them the opportunities to acquire practical basic skills for survival, which will stay with them much longer than anything else. In addition, the sense of feeling being wanted and needed at home will help to cultivate the sense of responsibility and obligation. Meanwhile, the wisdom and inspiration always pops up in deeds and everything could be advanced to knowledge. The list of the advantages coming with the engagement of children in chores could be endless and probably that is another reason for the holiness in chores. Let children join the parents in doing chores; otherwise they are deprived of the holy chances of digging their future well-being.

Having children take a hand does not mean they should follow the beaten path so as to be an expert in that field. The ultimate purpose of letting them in does not merely lies in getting a job done, which only just makes children feel they do it because they have to. Chores are holy for they could always bring unexpected outcomes. Thanks to this book, the impressive suggestion will help many overextended parents and constricted children find a relief—we are supposed to grant authority with responsibility regarding doing chores and let children decide their way to fulfill the task. Just as the old saying goes, “All roads lead to Rome”, children are entitled to their own journey to arrive at the destination, during which they develop their self-reliance, their creativity, their initiative and most important of all, they enjoy the job while learning and doing—which is a fun opportunity for practicing problem-solving skills instead of an irritating burden. True, that should be a more important purpose in getting them to the everyday chores.

In behavioral psychology, reinforcement is a consequence that will strengthen an organism's future behavior. Therefore, positive reinforcement is required to motivate children to contribute more to the future chores. It is not always necessary to be material rewards; but there should be serious recognition and well-timed praise. With sensitive perception, you will see how important an approving look or a pat on the back is to those little hearts; even when they fail to perform as well as they are supposed to.

By fostering children's competence to look after themselves and help the family, parents help them approach the holy potential of chores—improvement of survival skills and development of characters.

### 2.3.2 Holiness in Eating

In the article *The Cult of Busyness* presented by Barbara Ehrenreich, the author writes "Even eating, I read recently, is giving way to 'grazing'—the conscious ingestion of unidentified foods while drafting a legal brief, cajoling a client on the phone, and, in ambitious cases, doing calf-toning exercises under the desk" (Wu, 2010, p. 58). It seems that today everybody wants to squeeze time from busy schedule and that practice is even followed at home.

People are confused and lost at the basic manners in the high-pressure life, which, if not aware of or corrected in time, will soon become a bad role model for their children.

In the book, it reads "The Talmud recommended that one should eat slowly and chew the food well" (Mogel, 2008, p. 172) and we are advised to consider the dinner table as altar, where family members sit together to appreciate the effort and enjoy the moment of being together.

The principle sinks in and is enlightening. We do not merely eat for survival. Then, the attitude toward food should reveal our reverence with gratitude and consciousness. Playing and watching TV will divert all of us, children or parents, from enjoying the pleasure and happiness brought by eating while feeding oneself and leaving first shows the least respect to the chef, who devoted to the holy practice of preparing food. No matter how busy we are, the mealtime should be reserved, when the whole family sit around the table and cherish the pleasure eating brought us.

## 3. Conclusion

The book *the Blessing of a Skinned Knee* helps to relieve much doubt in child rearing from the perspective of culture. In addition, the relationship between science and philosophy drawn from certain culture is approached and interpreted. As Dr. Mogel claims, science and certain philosophy from culture are not in a competition, and integrating psychology (view of science) and philosophy of Judaism (voice from culture) could assist parents in raising and nurturing self-reliant children.

There are so many specific and effective approaches listed in the book, worthy of digestion and practice. It seems that the most important thing parents should do is to master the essence of Dr. Mogel's instruction—help children build good character traits and approach everyday actions with a sense of holiness and a grateful heart, the basics to life which could always stay with them and guide them along their path. Each child is unique and therefore demands differentiated guidance to fulfill his/her potential. The extent to which parents get involved in their children's development is well defined by the principle of moderation. The peace of mind is also an essential element in building character.

Indeed, this book is not merely instructive in teaching parenting; it guides adults to the right way too. With inspiration from moderation, celebration and sanctification, we learn to be right role models and then we could pass on the good philosophy toward life to our children.

Parenting can be stressful and challenging, but it is also creative and rewarding. With peaceful mind and guidance of right philosophy, we are able to raise healthy, strong and self-reliant children.

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